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It Boils Down to Credibility

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By Lt. jg Aaron Weisbrod, psychology graduate student, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences.



A key aspect of the OSCAR mission involves the provision of mental health care and treatment for personnel in their respective units, the ability to adequately enable this function requires a solid understanding of and appreciation for the Marine Corps culture.

Operational Stress Control and Readiness (OSCAR) teams provide embedded mental health care expertise for Marines and Sailors operating in Marine Corps units.


Navy psychologists are included in these teams and are directly responsible for accomplishing the mission of OSCAR teams. While naturally a key aspect of the OSCAR mission involves the provision of mental health care and treatment for personnel in their respective units, the ability to adequately enable this function requires a solid understanding of and appreciation for the Marine Corps culture. In other words, being a good OSCAR psychologist doesn't just require the provider to be a good psychologist, but

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Lt. Ashley Clark, who as the first female OSCAR psychologist will tell you, with one word what it boils down to is – Credibility.

rather a good Marine psychologist.

Ask Lt. Ashley Clark, who as the first female OSCAR psychologist will tell you, with one word what it boils down to: Credibility. As an OSCAR psychologist, “you belong to the Marines” and as the resident mental health expert, it is paramount that you “make yourself known to Marines” which may in addition to clinical time in the office, may also include your willingness and ability to join Marines on 11 mile hikes, unit runs, and at machine-gun ranges. Clark is assigned to 1stMARDIV in Camp Pendleton, Calif. While her assignment does not place her directly within Marine infantry regiments as with other OSCAR billets, at 1stMARDIV she is the in-house expert for several division-level units, including three combat arms units, a special staff member, and direct command consultant for the CO.



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As she explains, it’s a “delicate balance” to meet all of these demands. While her current duties require tireless effort and dedication, the process involved with attaining this role required the same if not more. When asked about the process and what may have helped, Clark humbly replies with, “luck”, but it’s also clear that persistence and motivation also played a key role. She says it’s a mixture of persistently notifying her specialty leader of her desire to serve with Marines as well as good timing when the billet came up as a “hot fill”. Simply put, when the need arose, her

name was the first remembered, and she was ready to go, with a combination of willingness and readiness.

The willingness may stem from her internship days at MCRD, where she learned that what honor, courage, and commitment meant, and that “every Marine is a rifleman.” She gained appreciation for the discipline and motivation of Marines. As she recalls, “I just really wanted to be a part of it. If you tell a Marine to do something, it’s going to get done. And from a

September 2014 (20)

August 2014 (14)

July 2014 (13)

June 2014 (8)

May 2014 (11)

April 2014 (9)

March 2014 (14)

February 2014 (7)

January 2014 (7)

December 2013 (7)

November 2013 (12)

October 2013 (7)

September 2013 (14)

August 2013 (13)

July 2013 (11)

June 2013 (22)

May 2013 (15)

April 2013 (14)

March 2013 (14)

February 2013 (14)

January 2013 (12)

December 2012 (11)

November 2012 (11)

October 2012 (7)

September 2012 (9)

August 2012 (12)

July 2012 (13)

June 2012 (17)

May 2012 (22)

April 2012 (14)

clinical standpoint, at the time, that was something I could really appreciate.” The readiness entailed taking care of herself mentally and physically, by staying in shape and increasing her knowledge of the Marine Corps.

Naturally, you may wonder about her experience as the first female OSCAR psychologist, in a billet normally reserved for males because of their direct involvement with infantry units. Clark explains that credibility is already a key issue for military psychologists in general given their relatively limited history with combat units, and stigma towards mental health. Given these challenges are already present; she acknowledges the added pressures a female provider may experience to “prove herself” as a member of a male dominated, combat-arms unit. While Clark happily shares that she has not experienced any discrimination or negative feedback with regard to being a female, nor any logistical limitations with regard to gear, or field hygiene or berthing issues; she also emphasizes how she has prioritized her own behaviors to exude confidence, professionalism, and a willingness to learn and be among Marines.



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So far it seems this attitude has helped her prevail at her current assignment, so much that her desire to deploy has been mitigated by her command’s reluctance to let her go. She says, you have to “make yourself available and accessible” and be willing to get “out of the bubble” and interact with a multitude of Marine leaders. It seems the key to her being treated with parity is her willingness to work towards earning the respect commensurate with the Marine perspective; versus just expecting it as a

token of her title.

As she puts it, “once you earn the trust of a Marine, you have it forever.” But it has to earned, and while this is a challenge, it has been a challenge she has fully embraced and enjoyed. Importantly, she reflects on this lesson as being applicable for all Navy psychologists seeking to work with warriors who wear the eagle, globe, and anchor. For those interested in following a similar trajectory as hers, she offers this: 1) Be willing: stay persistent and motivated. 2) Be ready: stay mentally and physically fit. 3) Remember that you are part of a warfighting organization and how you fit into being a part of that mission.

March 2012 (13)
February 2012 (14)
January 2012 (13)
December 2011 (13)
November 2011 (20)
October 2011 (22)
September 2011 (12)
August 2011 (16)
July 2011 (10)

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OSCAR
Again LT Clark is NOT the first female OSCAR psychologist in the Navy. Please check your facts before you publish such articles as you are devaluing the person who did serve as the first female OSCAR psychologist in a combat zone, and that was LT Colleen Barnum, who was with RCT-1 in Fallujah in 2008.